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The Fizzle: Alleged Plot Against Haiti Ended in Choppy Seas

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MIAMI—He was a novice mercenary, sunburned and thirsty after three days at sea and one night in jail, his first mission gone bust 690 miles short of the beachhead. And now here he was inside the Super Duper Sandwich Haven downtown, washing down the bile of misadventure with a cold beer.

"I was just out there at sea getting a tan," he said with a wink.

The beer-drinker, an unemployed security guard freed on his own recognizance after being arrested last week as a would-be Haitian invader, was a bit player in an exile soap opera gone awry. He and 15 seasick comrades are accused of plotting to take on the Haitian army and topple dictator Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier, a plot, if true, that is part Woody Allen, part Clint Eastwood.

Such sagas are everyday affairs in Miami, America's Casablanca of mystery, murder and exile intrigue. Plots are forever hatching, fizzling and hatching again, amid many winks about CIA backing. But the usual plotters are Cubans and Nicaraguans out to overthrow communists back home, their dreams fueled by a perception of support from Washington.

The Haitian exiles are taken less seriously. For one thing, the United States supports "Baby Doc." For another, the Haitians have a reputation as gentle, docile people whose plots always fizzle.

The leader of last week's two-boat armada says that he was taking the men to a paramilitary training camp 30 miles off Cuba, but whatever the purpose of the sail, it would have to be called a fizzle. It ended in choppy seas 10 miles off Florida when the Coast Guard, acting on a tip, boarded two luxury cabin cruisers and arrested the 16 for violating the U.S. Neutrality Act, which outlaws launching coups against friendly countries from American shores. Ten of the men remain behind bars on bonds as high as \$250,000.

At a nearby table, three federal agents chomped sandwiches and glared, dismissing the alleged plot as suicide. "You're alive drinking a beer because of us," sneered one enforcer. "We did them a favor," said another. "Baby Doc's Leopard Battalion would have strung them up by their toes."

From his command post in a run-down stucco hacienda near the Miami Baseball Stadium, Roland Magloire, 46, an ex-airline ticket agent and nephew to a onetime Haitian president, orchestrated the affair, according to the self-styled leader of the force, Benjamin Weissberg. The house is headquarters for Magloire's exile political group, the Council for the National Liberation of Haiti (CNLH).

The plans called for the men aboard the chartered yachts Sassoon and Wanderlust III to be point men for a major assault dubbed "Operation Lobos," named after Cayo Lobos Island, where 100 starving Haitians were once marooned until the press uproar over their plight brought about their rescue. Reinforcements consisted of some 250 boat people—mostly Haitian migrants recruited from squalid shanties in Belle Glade and trained by ex-special forces instructors at the same Everglades camps used by Cuban and Nicaraguan exiles.

For the last eight months, Magloire has jetted between Miami, New York and Chicago, seeing Haitian money men and raising \$75,000 to finance the mission. Meanwhile, Magloire's brother, Raoul, a New York real estate man, shuttled migrants in vans between Belle Glade and the Everglades camps.

The initial invasion force was recruited through ads in The Miami Herald last month. "Small multinational corporation needs security help," read one ad, which ran Feb. 27. "Short-term compensation plus bonus."

Applicants had to furnish military personnel records to prove combat specialties. Sixteen men were chosen from almost 300 responses.

One of those arrested was Robert Martin, 31, a burly ex-Marine and unemployed jet mechanic reduced to pumping gas to pay his \$400-a-month mortgage. Now, he's behind bars under \$250,000 bond. "He had resumes out all over town," said his girlfriend, Elaine Karlsen. "He just answered the wrong ad."

The latest of the prior attempted Haitian invasions happened a couple of months ago, when a small force landed on Tortuga, an island off the northwest coast of Haiti. According to Haitian officials, the invaders "succumbed to their wounds" after killing an undisclosed number of soldiers. The alleged leader of the force was Bernard Sansaricq, 37, a Fort Lauderdale gas station owner. He never landed himself and is in Florida, facing charges of violating the Neutrality Act.

The thwarted coup attempts have badly divided the Haitian community. For some, the failures have dashed dreams of Duvalier's overthrow and reinforced his aura of invincibility. But others point to the attempts as evidence of boiling point frustration over U.S. immigration policy toward 2,100 boat people still imprisoned in detention camps here after eight months, and America's support for the dictator whose repressive policies led them to flee in the first place.

"Hit a Haitian once, hit him twice, he won't say nothing, he won't get mad," says Raoul Magloire, 50. "Up to a point, he believes God wants it that way. But keep hitting him, and he will react so violently you won't believe it."

"We are fed up," says Viter Juste, 57, a Little Haiti book store owner and community leader. "You don't want us to stay here, and you won't let us go home and make our country free so Haitians will want to return."

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As the bedraggled commandos—10 Americans (mostly Vietnam combat veterans), five Haitians and one Canadian—filed into federal court after their arrests last week, Juste sat among 40 supporters who sported red and blue CNLH buttons and waved. "They are heroes," he insisted. "We are proud of them."

To avoid scrutiny, the boats were to tie up on tiny Navasau Island, a disputed spit of land off the coast of Haiti frequented by drug smugglers and ignored by authorities. Heavy weapons and more troops were to be flown in on cue.

Once the two cabin cruisers were beyond the three-mile limit, the semi-automatic weapons in the cache of 61 assault rifles, carbines, shotguns and handguns seized by the Coast Guard were to be converted to full automatic. On board, according to law enforcement officials, there were 17 CS gas grenades, 16,000 rounds of ammunition, copies of Soldier of Fortune and Survival magazines and enough frozen steaks, orange juice, chocolate chip cookies and Jack Daniels to last a week.

Once the invaders were ashore, a fifth column of 50 exiles who had infiltrated the country as seamen, students and frustrated peasants returning home were to come to their aid, blowing up power plants, cutting communications lines. A secret password broadcast over the radio was to be the signal.

Then, the initial assault on an unidentified town one hour north of Port au Prince was to begin.

"We weren't going to storm the presidential palace," said one member, seeking to combat criticism that only a ship of fools would attempt to invade Haiti. "We weren't that stupid. But you don't have to take the capital to take the country. We were just going to take a little and let it have a snowball effect."

According to the plan, sympathetic army commanders were to supply support if the commandos could hold the town for 48 hours. And, voila, Roland Magloire, 46, would cashay into town, form a new junta and return democracy to Haiti. Only it didn't end that way.

Magloire has been plotting for 20 years. After joining a 1963 scheme by army officers against Haitian President Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier, he fled the country. Four years later, he put together a military invasion from the Bahamas, but was jailed by Nassau authorities before it got off the ground.

About 30 of his men proceeded anyway, landed three planes on the north end of the poorest nation in the western hemisphere and enjoyed the backing of the area commander, he says. But, according to Magloire, the leaders abandoned their men and fled. Magloire's younger brother, Maurice, was captured and executed. "We are not comedians, we have people willing to die," said Roland Magloire, while a fellow exile wiped tears from his eyes.

This time, Magloire personally chose his commander: three-tour Vietnam combat veteran Weissberg, 32, an ex-Army Special Forces captain with red hair and a matching mustache who said in an interview that since Vietnam, life had been "boring." He said he was courted over hamburgers in a Little Haiti cafe.

"Where are the new frontiers? You can't get ahead today unless you're born into money, or willing to kiss a--. Even if you're an aerospace engineer, what can you do except plug computer tapes into NASA computers? This was a new frontier," he said. He wore an orange jump suit, his new uniform as a guest of the federal prison here while he shops for a lawyer to get his \$250,000 bond reduced.

In January, Weissberg moved into Magloire's headquarters, began recruiting his Dirty Dozen plus three, bought the guns, chartered the boats and on March 12, told his men, "Pack your racks and get ready to go."

Asked if they were aware of the mission, he said, "If they weren't, they were fools," but he later said that at least one of the men was not aware of the "military" nature of the operation.

In a later interview with another reporter, Weissberg said the group was not actually on its way to Haiti—they were headed for a paramilitary training mission on the tiny island of Cay Sal, about 30 miles off Cuba.

On March 13, Weissberg and another charter captain drove to a Coconut Grove marina, cranked up the Wanderlust. III and the Sassoon (rented from unwitting international designer Vidal Sassoon) and shoved off. The men met the boats in Islamorada, spent a day snorkeling, then headed down the intercoastal waterway and out to sea. It was rough. The commandos got seasick.

Just off Sombrero Key, Weissberg glanced over his shoulder and spied what appeared to be a huge fishing boat. The white smoke stack of a Coast Guard cutter came into view. The cutter roared by. Then came the order: "Wanderlust, this is the Coast Guard. Stand by for boarding."

"I don't have a death wish," he reflected from prison. "But we were willing to die to return Haiti to its people, stop communists from taking over after Baby Doc and rid the taxpayers of supporting a despotic regime. I'd do it again tomorrow."